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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 003538

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ORTHODOX BISHOP AUDI CRITICAL OF AOUN,
HIZBALLAH

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The Ambassador met November 3 with the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan, Bishop Ilias Audi, to request Audi's assistance in reducing tensions in Lebanon by dissuading his followers from walking out of the government or taking to the streets. Bishop Audi shared his view of the situation, said that he believes Aoun followers will take to the streets if there is no new government. He expressed fear and loathing for Hizballah. He said he would talk to his followers about respecting the democratic process and resisting attempts to bring down the government. End Summary.

REQUESTING ASSISTANCE

2. (C) The Ambassador called November 3 on the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan, Ilias Audi, bishop and head of the Greek Orthodox Church in Lebanon. The Ambassador conveyed deep USG concern about tensions in Lebanon, and in particular the disturbing political rhetoric of Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader General Michel Aoun. If the Berri-sponsored national consultations do not result in a cabinet expansion, Aoun seems to have plans to take his followers to the streets, along with members and supporters of Hizballah. The Ambassador requested Audi to counsel his followers to show restraint.

HIZBALLAH NOT LEBANESE AT HEART

3. (C) Audi referred to reports in the paper that the previous day's discussion between the Ambassador and Aoun was "frank" and indicated that he understood that the term "frank" was used to mean confrontational. Audi then shared his views on Hizballah. He believes that Hizballah, whether or not it "won" the war, destroyed Lebanon. He questioned whether Hizballah is really Lebanese, saying that in Hizballah-dominated regions there are no Lebanese flags, no playing of the national anthem, nor any other indication of Lebanese patriotism. Hizballah does not care whether it destroys the country. Now Hizballah is seeking to regain its position after the war, especially as many Lebanese are blaming Hizballah for the lost summer tourism season and Lebanon's ever more strained financial situation.

4. (C) Bishop Audi, referring to Hizballah specifically "as

they are now," said that if Hizballah does choose to overthrow the GOL, "no one can stop them." He believes that Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah is more of a partner to Iranian clerics than a mere adherent, and Hizballah sees itself as a spiritual extension of Iran. He cited a Hizballah leader referring to Iran as holding a position for Lebanon's Shia much as the Vatican is to Catholics. He further referred to a local Iranian trade fair as filled with pictures and tapes of Nasrallah. He discounted the notion that Syria is any more than an intermediary. Nasrallah can easily reject Syrian demands now, Audi said, claiming that Syria then calls Iran to ask requests be passed to Nasrallah.

AOUN AND HIZBALLAH USING EACH OTHER

15. (C) Audi was very impassioned when talking about Nasrallah's recent interview, saying that he could not bring himself to listen to it, but only read it the next day. He said that Nasrallah "lies" and judges everyone. Hizballah regards the Aoun bloc as a way to reach the necessary majority -- Shia plus a large percentage of Christians -- and as providing protective cover outside of the Shiite south. Aoun in turn sees the alliance with Hizballah as a route to the presidency, or at least a way to disturb the current balance of power.

16. (C) Asked to elaborate about Aoun, the Bishop was blunt, saying that he believes that the only reason that Aoun returned from exile was to achieve the presidency, and (hinting at Syrian collusion) that "he must have been sent." MP Michel Murr told him that if Aoun became president, Aoun would "take care of everything," including the removal of Lahoud. Audi believes that Murr told the Patriarch the same thing. Audi said that Aoun is not a "man of ideals" and not

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a leader.

ORTHODOX MINISTERS WALK-OUT?

17. (C) Of the three Greek Orthodox members of the cabinet, only Environment Minister Yaacoub Sarraf might decide to leave if Hizballah and Aoun called for a walk-out. Audi believes that Sarraf would be inclined to leave, but he said he told Sarraf that "he hopes they will be together." He said that Sarraf, while not considering the Siniora government corrupt, nevertheless believes it is not honest and might be compromised.

CHARLES RIZK FOR PRESIDENT

18. (C) Audi asked himself who would make the best president from among current Lebanese politicians, and answered that he believed strongly in Charles Rizk, the current Minister of Justice. He was very positive about Rizk on all counts. In his view, Rizk had successfully maintained good relations with virtually all significant political factions in Lebanon, and "he is not a Syrian." Rizk thus could bridge the differences, Audi said, lamenting that Maronite Patriarch Sfeir characteristically will not be explicit about advancing a presidential candidate.

CRITICISM OF USG "DECLARATIONS"

19. (C) Audi said that when the USG makes "declarations" it hurts the situation in Lebanon. It would be better, in his opinion, if the USG could quietly persuade Aoun that his actions are destroying his country, and that the USG will not interfere with democratically-rendered changes in government.

FELTMAN